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Malcolm: Diana and Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetics of Photography / Freund: Photography and Society

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Either one is left gasping and horrified by this vision of a new conceptual revolution brought about by computers, in which case the conceptual framework of the book will also be unacceptable—it would be best to leave it on the coffee table to glance through and look at the pictures; or one may be excited and exhilarated by the technological revolution, in which case one may enjoy looking at human vision through the eyes, as it were, of a computer.

Janet Malcolm. Diana and Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetic of Photography. Boston: David R. Godine, 1980. 165 pp., photographs. $13.95 (cloth).

Gisèle Freund. Photography and Society. Boston: David R. Godine, 1980. 231 pp., photographs. $15.00 (cloth).

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Several years ago, Susan Sontag wrote that "a widely agreed-on" attitude argues that a society can be considered "modern" when "one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images." She went on to assert that within this modern society "the images that have virtually unlimited authority are...mainly photographic images" and that "the scope of this authority stems from the properties peculiar to images taken by the camera" (Sontag 1977:153). She recognized that a modern society communicates largely through visual means, and that an understanding of "the properties peculiar to images taken by the camera" is essential for the understanding of the means of communication within the contemporary world.

It is for this reason that we should welcome two books recently published by David Godine of Boston, both of which represent an attempt to analyze precisely these "properties peculiar to images taken by the camera." Janet Malcolm's *Diana and Nikon* approaches the issue from the tradition of formalist art criticism; Gisèle Freund's *Photography and Society* approaches the issue from the tradition of Marxist critical theory. The two books are in a sense complementary, at least to the extent that they represent two of the major approaches to photographic criticism. Both propose certain questions, but Freund's book certainly provides more answers. Perhaps this is because she is not trapped by the dichotomy indicated by the books' titles: that, somehow, the aesthetic aspects of photography should be distinct from the social aspects.

Janet Malcolm's *Diana and Nikon* is a collection of 11 essays which, with one exception, originally were written for *The New Yorker* at various times during the past few years. Malcolm is one of the few serious photographic critics working for a major magazine, and as such she has had to make her way into relatively uncharted territory. In these essays, she is certainly searching for the properties peculiar to art photography; she is searching for the identity of the photographic critic as well. It is, however, a very self-conscious quest, and she is candid enough in her preface to admit that in "rereading these essays" she is reminded of "someone trying to cut down a tree who has never done it before, isn't strong, has a dull axe, but is very stubborn" (p. ix). She certainly makes a brave attempt, but unfortunately this particular tree is very large, and one suspects that she is inadvertently using the wrong end of the axe.

Malcolm, like most critics involved with the discussion of the aesthetics of photography, is concerned about the position of the photograph in the world of art vis-à-vis the painting. She distinguishes herself from many less successful writers, however, by the ruthlessness with which she is willing to expose the dependence of certain photographers upon this older and better-established medium. In discussing the work of Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Seccession group at the turn of the century, for example, she unequivocally states that "the most advanced photographers were modelling their work on Symbolist, Impressionist, and Pre-Raphaelite painting" and creating, as a result, "portentous, misty landscapes" and "blurred, symbolic portraits... of sad, gowned women and marmoreal, naked children" (pp. 2-3). And in discussing the work of Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Man Ray, major figures in the medium 20 years later, she argues that their achievement was largely "to replace the Impressionist, Symbolist, and Pre-Raphaelite models of the Photo-Seccession with those of the Cubist, Futurist, Dadaist, Purist, and Surrealist art" (p. 21). Few writers are so willing to devastate the sacred images of any medium.

But the analysis of the relationship between photography and painting that represents one of the strong points of her approach to photographic history paradoxically contributes to her downfall as well. As a historian, she is refreshingly willing to revise the accepted manner of looking at the "classics" of photographic history: many professionals in the field have suspected the strong connection between avant-garde photography and avant-garde painting, but few have been so forthright in their analysis of it. As a critic, however, she has placed herself in an entirely untenable position, as the method of criticism that has most influenced her is one that is inextricably associated with painting. Moreover, it is a method of criticism that developed, at least

to some extent, as a means of coping with the need for painting to define itself vis-à-vis photography.

Malcolm argues in her preface that it is in her ninth essay, "Two Roads, One Destination," that she begins to "untangle" some of photography's "knottier issues" (p. ix). This statement is an important one, because it is in this essay that she discusses her debt to the two writers, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who have been most influential in the formulation of her approach to photographic criticism. Both are closely associated with painting in general and with Abstract Expressionism in particular, and as historical figures both hold unquestioned places in the development of the art of the fifties and the sixties.

She begins her essay by quoting Greenberg's famous definition of modernism in painting:

> The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. Manet's paintings became the first modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted....
>
> Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a modernist painting as a picture first. [p.113]

Here, Greenberg has established those qualities which he feels are inherent to painting: the rectangular shape of the canvas, the two-dimensionality of its surface, and the texture of the paint itself. In so doing, he has defined painting's identity without concern for content and subject matter and, incidentally, has formally distinguished the painting from the photograph.

Malcolm's essay goes on to refer to an equally seminal statement by Harold Rosenberg, one that emphasizes the particular point in time at which painters began to become fascinated with the very gesture of placing paint on canvas:

> The canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter. [p. 116]

Rosenberg has emphasized the act of painting itself rather than the object produced, and thus, like Greenberg, has defined painting's identity without concern for subject matter.

The importance of this approach to art criticism is that it provides a means of defining "modernism" in art by analyzing the formal qualities of any one medium. Like the orders in architecture, the sonata form in music, and the meter in English poetry, such formal characteristics can establish the matrix that the artist can work within—or react against. Much of the painting of the fifties and sixties, as a result, can be understood only in the context of a specific painterly tradition that came before it.

The central issue presented by Malcolm's essays, therefore, is whether it is possible to argue that the modern photograph can be analyzed relative to the tradition of photography in the same way as the modern painting can be seen in relationship to its predecessors. Malcolm attempts to do it; and certainly this search for a formal definition of "modernism" is the unifying theme of an otherwise heterogeneous series of essays.

The problem Malcolm must confront is that the only well-defined tradition in photography is pictorialism, an attitude by which photographs are patterned after the major avant-garde movements in painting. But one of the strong points of her essays is her recognition that such an approach simply means the photograph has been derived from the painting. As there is little in the tradition of "art" photography to which she can turn, she looks instead to the wide body of commercial and amateur photography, arguing that it "seems as if every master photograph strainfully created by an art photography has an equivalent in the unselfconscious vernacular of commercial or news or amateur photography" (p. 64). And it is to this "unselfconscious vernacular" that she turns as a place to find the photograph's essential nature.

As a result, one of the central themes within Malcolm's essays is the argument that "photography went modernist not, as has been supposed, when it began to imitate abstract art, but when it began to study snapshots" (p. 113). If Greenberg could point to Manet as the first "modern" painter because of the manner in which he emphasized the two-dimensional surface of his canvas (something previous painters had deemphasized in favor of illusionistic three-dimensionality), Malcolm points to Robert Frank as the first "modern" photographer, because he "scrupulously shed all the pictorial values of his predecessors." He shed "composition, design, tonal balance, print quality" and permitted the camera to do "what no art photographer has ever hitherto let it get away with—all the accidents of light, the messy conjunctions of shape, the randomness of framing, the disorderliness of the composition, the arbitrariness of gesture and expression, [and] the blurriness and graininess of the printing." And she goes on to argue that he thereby "showed photography at its most photographic" (p. 114).

Malcolm follows this same sort of argument in other contexts as well. In her title essay, "Diana and Nikon," she speaks of "the most inartistic (and presumably most purely photographic) form of all—the home snapshot," and discusses its influence on "avant-garde photographers and theorists" who do not see "the endless sprawl of anonymous, commercial, and amateur pictures as a threatening encroachment," but who rather "embrace it as a repository of the revealed truth about photography's proper function and future directions." This allows them, in turn, to replace the "strong design, orderly composition, control over tonal values, lucidity of content, [and] good print quality" of traditional photography with the "formlessness, rawness, clutter, [and] accident" of the snapshot (p. 68). If the serious art photographer of the past might have been inspired by the goddess Diana, the contemporary photographer finds his muse in the Nikon. But the confusion is enormous, a fact that Malcolm recognizes. In referring to "the serious photographer," she writes that "caught between the dead hand of traditional photography and the shaking, fumbling one of the snapshot school, he may well despair" (p. 72). Formalist criticism as applied to photography seems to be able to set a trap for artists and critics alike.

As a means of establishing the identity of the photographic image, the snapshot is undeniably important, and Malcolm is correct in emphasizing its significance. But she goes astray when she assumes that it is "the accidents of light, the messy conjunctions of shape, the randomness of framing," and the "disorderliness of the composition" that are its essential qualities. The snapshot is indeed purely photographic, but not necessarily because of "formlessness, rawness, clutter, [and] accident." Rather, the snapshot takes on its purely photographic characteristics as a means of recording a particular event. It is a visual document, an essential part of birthday celebrations, Christmas parties, and the summer trip to the mountains. Individuals with Instamatics and Nikons capture the object viewed—whether the face of El Capitain in Yosemite or a wedding dress—as a means of keeping it for the future. Actions are caught in a moment of time, frozen, and preserved. The "accidents of framing" and "the messy conjunctions of shape" are a biproduct, not an essential ingredient. If one is trying to define the essential nature of the snapshot, at some point one has to recognize that it is above all a means of recording and transmitting information on a visual basis. Unfortunately, Malcolm, with her predilection for formalist criticism, does not take this fact into account.

It is fortunate, therefore, that the translation of Gisèle Freund's *Photography and Society* into English has been published at the same time as Malcolm's book. She and Malcolm differ widely in their approach to the subject: whereas Malcolm looks for the essential nature of photography in terms of certain formal characteristics of the snapshot, Freund analyzes the photograph as a means of transmitting, and indeed controlling, information. For her, the processes and mechanisms of photography, as the very title of her book makes clear, are inextricably associated with the society in which they are produced. She begins her book, in fact, with the statement that forms the basis of her approach to all aspects of visual communication: "Photography is a concrete example of how artistic expression and social forms continually influence and reshape one another" (p. vii).

Photography and Society grew out of Freund's doctoral dissertation that was written at the Sorbonne during the thirties. It was, as she has observed, "the first thesis ever presented" (p. vii) on the subject of photographic history; but it has lost none of its relevance in the intervening years. The first section analyzes the history of nineteenth-century photography; it emphasizes not the isolated photographer as "artist" but rather the photographer who has a close association with the changing society that was emerging from the impact of industrialism. Nineteenth-century photography, as Freund explains, "was the child of advances in science and the rising classes' [bourgeoise] need for a new form of artistic expression" (p. 69). The second section, an addition to her dissertation, concentrates on photography in the twentieth century; here she emphasizes not photography as personal expression, but rather photography as a means of transmitting information to the largest possible segment of the population. "The invention of photography," as she points out, "marks the starting point of the mass media, which play an all-powerful role as a means of communication" (p. 217). Throughout both sections, her central thesis, as a result, is that one must be made entirely aware that photography "has become the most common language of our civilization" (p. 218). And associated with that central thesis is an essential question: if photography is a major means of communication, who determines the information that is communicated?

It is in this context that Freund's own experience comes to the forefront. She is a practicing photographer, and is intimately aware of the importance of the specific information that is transmitted in a photograph. And, as she was a refugee from Nazi Germany, she is also aware of the damage that can be done when visual communications are controlled by a totalitarian regime. In regard to both political and commercial concerns, she is speaking from experience when she writes that "photography's tremendous power of persuasion in addressing the emotions is consciously exploited by those who use it as a means of manipulation" (p. 216). Freund is a vibrant social critic, and much of her book exposes precisely the brutality of those individuals and organizations using photography as a means of social manipulation. Even her chapter titles indicate this concern, as they run the gamut from "Photography as a Political Tool" to "The Scandal-Mongering Press."

Freund is not at all concerned with the formal approach to photography that intrigues Janet Malcolm; rather, she sees herself as an objective observer of her society, in terms of both written and visual analysis. She is in the best sense of the word an "intellectual," in that she has developed an all-encompassing perspective of her own society and of the forces that dominate it. As a result, rather than being attracted to writers who take a formal approach to art, such as Greenberg and Rosenberg, she is influenced by writers associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin (himself a refugee from National Socialism), as well as by thinkers associated with the early years of sociology, such as Karl Mannheim. She footnotes Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia,* in fact, when she writes that

> intellectuals have always had both a role to perform in history and a special function in their own society. Separated by knowledge and culture, they can understand their relative historical position and choose their own course in life accordingly. They can have a more open view of the world, a vision not available to other groups of society restricted by political and social status. [p. 21]

Freund quite clearly identifies with this idea, and both her writings and her photographs follow this objective approach to social evaluation. In fact, if Mannheim's body of work can be described, as it often is, as the "sociology of knowledge," Freund's book can be best understood as the sociology of knowledge transmitted on a visual basis.

The photograph is a powerful means of communication and is naturally affected by, and has an effect on, the society in which it is produced. Her book is the best available analysis of this fact; in fact, in France and Germany it has already achieved the distinction of being a "classic." It could easily be used as a textbook for a course on the sociology of visual communication.

Photography and Society does, however, have its drawbacks: as an analysis of the place of photography within the larger social context, it leaves very little room for the analysis of photography as artistic expression, and almost no place at all for an investigation of the concept of an avant-garde. While Freund is willing to argue that photography "provides a means of expression for millions of amateurs" (p. 200), she finds it fundamentally unnecessary to discuss the role of the photograph within the world's museums and cultural institutions. Are we to assume that art photography has become so concerned with formalism that it has no relationship to society? This attitude might be justified if one has read nothing except *Diana and Nikon,* but, in reality, there are large segments of photographic history that are closely associated with both artistic and social concerns. Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky were intimately involved with revolutionary ideas in Russia during the twenties; Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange were concerned with the problems of depressed laborers in America during the thirties; and Janet Malcolm's own favorite, Robert Frank, photographed the images of affluence in America during the sixties. Freund includes a photograph of Evans in a chapter entitled "Press Photography," but most of the other artists are left unattended —a somewhat glaring gap.

Both *Diana and Nikon* and *Photography and Society* make valuable contributions to our understanding of the position of the photograph within the contemporary world. We have not yet arrived at a consensus as to the precise nature of the "properties peculiar to the image taken by the camera," again to use Susan Sontag's words. But we are certainly beginning to understand them more fully; both Malcolm and Freund have, from their own specific points of view, allowed a much greater insight into the basic nature of the photographic image.

Reference

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  1977 On Photography. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.